Sensing Story:
Moving with Amerta and the Living Image at Phihoaan Beach

Margit Galanter

On Stories, Narrative, and the Unsaid

Professor Cristiana Giordana

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"*Our presence can give birth to story, can be a sensing story*."

—SUPRAPTO SURYODARMO (PRAPTO), WISMA SENI, SOLO, JAVA, FEBRUARY 24, 2017

Phiohaan Beach, South Java, 2017

I would like to begin this story of experiences with Amerta Movement here from this image above: a snapshot of a time and place, a memory, a spectrum of tones, a scene, and the moist air. I wonder how and what this image might evoke for you.

The picture connects me to an atmosphere - both in the place itself and in the experiences of movement and life that brought us to that moment at the beach. Is it possible to separate the two: place and lived, sensate experience?

What I recorded from the movement score in my notes that morning:[1]

temple
ocean
safety receiving measurement

temple

We were practicing that morning how to make that spot become a temple, perhaps in conversation with qualities of the several temples we had been practicing with over this time in Java. All the while, we were including our own speaking-being as part of and in dialogue with the environment. We moved on our own, but not alone, with a sense of communication with land, each other,—Widya Ayu Kusumawardani, Julie Nathanielsz, Prapto, and I, and the elements.

This past week, I had a movement session with Claire Osborne, an Amerta colleague and friend who lives in Ireland, on Zoom.[2] I asked if we could practice with the material from that day, the notes. We were interested in the phrase, "safety receiving measurement," and both found ourselves from them able to move without extending beyond ourselves, with a sense of room and breathing, and from there we could easefully receive a sense of temple of our respective and shared surroundings. What a gift, after spending these weeks writing *with* and *on* this moment, that this shared feeling-sense could arise in movement, here in my backyard, so far from that place and time. Something was and is available from the potency of the language and each of our practices over time.

The moisture,
the stones,
the atmosphere

[1] Notes, February 19, 2017
[2] Zoom session with Claire Osborne, March 13, 2021.

What is sensing language?

From the perspective of Amerta, there is a distinction between the idea of oral and sensing language, not only in human movement, but what can be ascertained from all of the living elements that surround us; a tree, the light, humidity, even the computer or device from which you see this right now has its own speaking sense.

One Amerta practice is to receive the speaking quality of different elements in a place through the lens of these two edges of a spectrum, sensing < and > oral. In sensing, for instance, while moving, one may pay attention to humidity, the space itself, the gradations of light, porosity, humidity. One might start to *get a sense* of what is being communicated through the *sensuary* quality of the air.[3] Often, in relation to the senses, a person can experience a quality of flatness, of receiving as a "thing," or filtering them out altogether due to so many factors, to the multi-stimulations of life and cultural training. Through an unfolding process in movement-dialogue that takes place in Amerta, one can begin to feel the changing of atmosphere, its tones, how light is different in different places, and how it affects one's skin.

Even the screen has a kind of quality, texture, dimensionality, and skin. Without getting to symbolism or meaning (oral), in practicing sensing language, one can be with the prosody of the senses.[4] From this, one can experience the interrelatedness of all elements, beings, and things, through the senses, the multitudes.

After several months practicing with Prapto this trip, alongside with Ayu, Julie, and so many different constellations of people, flora, and places, we came to Phiohaan Beach, South Java, near Pacitan. Like so much of the tropics, the beach spot was warm and turgid. The sky was full and opaque, the stones were multicolors. We each found a spot and allowed for it to become a sense of place, then something to unfold there in movement, in receiving.

That morning at the beach we had sat at the seaside *warung* (an outdoor family cart food spot) and conversed with Prapto's friend and colleague, Pak Ronogerjita. Pak Ronogerjita shared with us about the electro-energetic aspects of water, about water's vibration. Our discussion was based in curiosity about water, flow, how we can grow from and with this element. This elemental attitude, Prapto explained, is a traditional one, a high Javanese attitude; on the one hand, it has a religious orientation, and on the other hand, it has the quality of an old village practice and worldview for stories to rise from the elemental, a quality of animism.

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[3] "Sensuary" is a word coined by Lisa Nelson, friend and mentor, creator of the sensory-perceptual compositional practices, called "tuning" scores.
[4] Notes from Practice Session, Suprapto Suryodarmo, February 24, 2017.

Amerta Movement is a free movement form that grew out of Prapto's longtime practices in meditations (Vipassana and the Javanese form *Sumarah),* in movement experiments outdoors in temples and natural environments, in Javanese poetics, and as well through his own creative evolution in sharing these practices with other people, both amongst people from Indonesia, as well as many, many students internationally. It is a practice in intercultural movement dialogue that offers ways for movement in life that can be applied to many facets of practice, such as performing, teaching, home-life, and movement, itself. After twenty years practice, I find myself ready to write not only about Amerta, but also *from* and *with* it, in an attempt to express how the sensate and sensory language has so much to offer descriptions of experience, performance, ethnography, and the telling of a story. I would like to practice activating the sensate language alongside with description, contextualization, and reflective, perhaps ethnographic, storytelling.

One distinct aspect of Amerta Movement is the way in practice one is moving in receptivity with the surroundings. I have often said that it is so hard to describe this practice of Amerta, because the practice affects the participant so pervasively, like humidity or mist, itself, and that through practicing over time one redistributes the cellularity of one's being, becoming more distributed with the surroundings, dynamically in a gentle vibrancy with life. There is no particular recipe or formula to the practice; it contains so many layers of approach, many roadmaps, evolutions, nodes, techniques, and viewpoints. These are accessed through the way a facilitator reads the situation, based on the subtleties of place, in receptivity to each person present, and attuned to an arc of material being shared over a course of study, be it a few hours, days or months. The practice is based in free movement of the moment, guided by what unfolds amongst what is present, and through guidance of the person stimulating movement.

Prapto passed away in December 2019. There was also something remarkable about Prapto himself, and in my experience over time, each time in the practice I would come into increasing clarity about the poetic intentions of my life and I would experience felt, sensorial shifts that continue to have an effect on how I am oriented in life until now. The practice can lessen identification, soften boundaries, allowing for subtle conversation with place. The way Prapto guided people into receptivity with the atmosphere is singular, brilliant, and I have great thanks for his presence in my life. He was a gardener of the speaking-being, supporting each person in their own creative evolution.

In these months of practice in Java early 2017, we started our practice often from moving for breathing, itself, rather than moving to form or shape or to develop technique. Techniques would come later. From accessing a base of "breathing with the living communication of the breathing of life, itself," the experience of moving in place, with the

land and surroundings supported a multisensorial fullness of experience. This orientation of practice also invited a receptivity that instigated a story to unfold, by playing with one's habitual formations, character, and interaction. From there, the kind of technique or form of action that would follow would have a living, vibrant quality because it was connected to the source of living communication with the breathing of life.

At the beach, we practiced how nature itself can become a temple. In this case, the intention of orientation for the practice, or the "stage" we chose, could be daily life, or ritual, or bringing the quality of temple into performance. What can emerge through choosing one's stage and here, in a temple-sense, affects how any place can open up, through a layer of intention with the experience. Being with the vastness of the ocean, the horizon, with the multiple facets of this one place. Here in moisture, with one another, the atmosphere of *templeness* together arose.

Crystallization is a phenomenon that can take place through the process of practicing Amerta Movement over time; it is a crystallization of a way of working in relation to one's own creative evolution, which can be sparked through offering, be it a performance, an image, or sharing in movement. Over the course of an Amerta workshop or gathering, often in the final days together, participants will offer to the group or to the public. Crystallization refers to the phenomenon that starts to take place when all the elements start cooking. It arises *in* time, meaning not *on* time but in one's own time, in one's own groove, and differently for each person.[5] Most importantly, it is not something that can be taught, but rather it happens through one's own unfolding in relation to what they are cultivating in their garden sense, and through opening to the environment, to the atmosphere. Curiously, It's not an individualized process; a single person is a facet of a crystallization which is *in the happening*. Crystallization requires this kind of "cooking,"— being with it, alongside it, in the making, and it could take any kind of form.

Crystallization can help in the process of waking up someone's own interests, supporting passion, rather than a sense of work. In my own upbringing, industriousness has been implicitly and explicitly valued and entrained due to my work-ethic Jewish cultural roots, and also due to vast structural forces such as heteropatriarchal imperial capitalism that enforces and elicits labor obsession-compulsion, external success, and values effort over spending time with the ease and passion of the unfolding of life. What happens when a person really takes time and feels space, co-arising with all that surrounds?

With the sense of stage, Amerta practice can be intentionally oriented to grow in a certain layer of living. At times over the years of practice, my focus would be more towards home

[5] Personal Communication, Suprapto Suryodarmo, Notes, February 2017

life, or towards performance, or in relationship with land and kin, or in spiritual development, and the practices of Amerta could be applied as a layer that supported and guided the movement intention. Each person is growing in a shared garden that enables each to offer from their own sign-nature, their own story.

For me, there was a kind of crystallizing taking place there at the ocean, and in the night before performing together at the well.

February 18 , 2017
We have come to southern Central Java, in the Pacitan region, to perform in a festival created by our colleagues and a collective of local artists, an event intending to bring arts and cultural offerings into a traditional celebration, or *upacara adat,* called Tirto Wening (Javanese for water purification). The holiday is centered around the 300-year anniversary of *Sumur Njero,* or Njero Well in a village neighborhood Sukaharjo in the Pacitan region, for the annual ritual of carrying an urn of its water to the nearby town of Pacitan. By organizing several days of ritual and performance, including performances all along the procession from village to city, sound artists and cultural visionaries Amin, Misbach, and their collaborative team were revitalizing a holy day whose practice had previously been quite simple,— some prayers and a small procession,— to bring together neighboring towns to celebrate in ritual performances, and "wake up" the indigenous, experimental, and cultural life of the region.

This visionary gathering was inspired in part by several years of Amin and the team in dialogue with Prapto. Amin has dedicated the *balai* (raised straw hut gathering space) by the edge of his family's rice field as an arts / heritage / gathering space for his neighborhood for years; it is where folks gather to play, share time, study, and re-member traditional musical traditions of the area that are at risk of being lost. This 14 x 6 foot space is an artistic / cultural studio; it has become a source for large-scale productions as the one we engaged in; and it is a creative platform (literally and figuratively) born from these storied lands. The performances in many media, sound, dance, ritual, theater, mask, took place all over the neighborhood, in built stages, front yards, and on the streets from village to village until the final gathering in Pacitan city.

We performed a piece late in the evening, Ayu, Julie, Prapto, and myself, in the space around the well. It was oriented as a ritual performance, was based in free movement, with a score of "finding the seed of life," "how finding of source is connected to habitat," and finally, "feeling as facets of a crystal together, in constellation with the place."[6] We moved together with the sense of the environment, itself, as a temple of life. Here we were in this place, in

[6] Again, scribbled notes.

prayer, for a ritual in honor of the water and a sense of sharing in movement with and for members of the neighborhood and local community. I remember being nervous, as part of the happening of such a special event, and being in an altered state, and moving with my collaborators and with the feeling of the well— its depth, the thick cement border, the relics of other performances such as straw and lights, and the thickness of the atmosphere. I recall a sensation of tradition, awkwardness, prayer, heightened listening, and a surprising flow, as if it somehow began and then, it was over.

That night so much took place: viewing a rowdy Reog performance (trance music-dance form from Ponorogo, Central Java) of youth from Ponorogo, napping on mats on the floor in someone's living room, witnessing multiple gamelan events in neighborhood front yards, and a colleague Agus Bimo performing right before us; in "moving mantra." Agus recited mantras he constructed based on high Javanese from written text, that he drew on paper, after which he burned the pages and rubbed the ash mixed with well water all over his face and skin, consecration.

From the *Reog* performance, 2017, Tirto Wening, Sukoharjo, Java, Indonesia.

The photograph is a window into an experience, and mediates a constellation of experiences. With each image aspect, new facets come into being and change the experience of the ones “previous.” The photo gives a way to enter, or just a breath. An image evokes.

After spending time with the well and all of the peoples and performances, I felt a connection to my ancestral lineage, to ancestry as a source, its own well, and the ocean as the place where water from the spring, or source, finally ends up before rising again to become part of the atmosphere.

So there we are, the next day, different kinds of wetness
The sea and its moisture, glistening on each stone, the ocean, itself, my pores, the skin of the place, all turgid.The atmosphere is always present. The atmosphere can be received. And somehow it is through this receiving of atmosphere, a crystallization can happen, neither as work nor labor, more an unfolding. Unlike an adaptation, attunement has a quality of both receiving from where “you are,” letting go of occupations of the mind, and at the same time including oneself in the story. Atmosphere has a quality of feeling the relations of things, all the sounds, the light, the skin of things, nature, spirit, etc.

Moisture is an instigator, so much about sensing one’s volume, suspension, about the fecundity of what comes from following curiosity at the crossings, pulsations of ocean, these lapping waves, wavelike formations of coming into and out of knowing, and a growing alongside of that, the elemental forces of water. The elemental capacities of water to hold the past, ancestral knowing and at the same time the unknown, flow. And indeed stone, too, a portal, also atmospheric. Dew. Moisture as a receptacle and carrier of atmosphere.

What would be the sensing language of the elements in natural environments, of my hands typing on this screen making some kind of an account of Amerta Movement, and of the ocean that day? There would be smells, ellipses, sliding curves, mosaics, densities, places more porous, and others with definition, colors, a sense of the deep, shape, qualities and textures. To breathe, these words I am conjuring here, start to fill in or fill out, take dimension and help populate a space of writing that was somehow buried in the mind. I can start to feel-see the pile of books on the desk and the round of the lamp with this bursting cactus drooping to red in its foreground. The cool of the computer on the heels of my wrists. Back and forth between then and now and the sensing of the two in parallax. I can enter in somehow to the spot at the beach, and it can open up into a place, a field of memory and potential access to this temple sense.

The word *Amerta* / Sanskrit word *Amrta* refers to nectar, or the drink of the gods that grants immortality. Javanese language, especially high Javanese, has roots in Sanskrit due to historical and cultural syncretisms of Hindu imperialism such as the Majapahit Era, source of courts in Central Java until today. *Amrta* also refers to female nectar, or female ejaculation, elixir. In my experience, the Amerta Movement practice helps connect oneself to the source of creation, to one's creative evolution. This can offer richness or dimensionality of sensory-being, it can help one feel a sense of purpose or meaning, and it can enrich intention towards life, towards one's stage; when one is connected to their sense of source, they can experience more fully the vibrancies of which they are part.

Somehow, in the temple-ocean, the nectar-sense arose for me in the airwaves, through the moisture, porosity, in the fullness and breathing of life, itself.

I would like to investigate more deeply why exactly Prapto named this work *Joged Amerta* (Amerta Movement), and perhaps it is not simply one story. Several friends and colleague-practitioners of the form will give a slightly different answer. One thing that is clear in the practice is that Amerta movement reveals how to more intimately connect with the liveness of life and the "speaking being." From this view, we are already in communication with our surroundings, and sometimes we can open this speaking through receptivity, breathing, through sharing time, in time and in one's groove. There is a speaking of each being, and a common field grows through emergent communication, through the subtle and sensing movement.

Storied Place
Land, and a place. Even further layered here through the mediation of this form, you sitting "there" (here) reading "this" (what?) on screen, and the photographic image is pixels, tones of light. Does it have dimension, beyond what the viewer creates? Can we radically create dimension, and what grounds an image in the weight of place and gravity of earth-based experience? Is the virtual the part of electro-magnetics that has no form, even though there are materials associated that indeed have actual material and substance? Perhaps the viewer-reader (you, they, we) can experience a kind of connectivity more rapidly, perhaps as fast as light speed, with immediacy, but what of the magnetism comes through? What about the moisture, itself? You t/here (virgule) with your own bodily moistures, and me here typing with "mine," we could each access, perhaps receive the waves, but what is shared moisture through a screen? What are the synchronicities of the asynchronous experience, and what is the shared field?

The unknown.

With Prapto, before his passing and before Zoom became a household name, a verb, a nemesis, and our best access due to the COVID-19 pandemic, before a bat or some bats unleashed a virus through their visionary receptivity to the ecocide of global deforestation, several longtime Amerta practitioners gathered with Prapto in the summer of 2019, in Merigar, Italy for study, practice, and sharing facilitation in an Open Market. We were exploring moving together on the platform, Zoom in the months afterward. We practiced with sensing our own skin, the screen as skin, with light, the skin of our spaces. We practiced with the gallery squares as windows into one another's dimensional spaces, also, too alive, with depth, an actuality along with the simulacrum. It offered a set of perspectives and tools that I have been powerful to apply in my teaching and sharing online in this very strange time. Was it prescient? Well, that might be magical thinking; it was the way the world had been going anyways.

In one of the last Whatssap texts between Prapto and myself a few days before his death, he wrote: "Hi margit, ok will meet soon, i still think about vision for future, simulacrum? Nature reality and virtual reality? Imagination, mythos, fiction? How this all create a being. Ok will talk slowly, see you 😍 🤩 "

Over the past few years, I had been noticing how Prapto had seemingly fully embraced and incorporated social media and the virtual, as more facets available to conduct into the sensing-speaking-being.

Writing with

The stones are warm, damp. I place my bag and sandals over to the side by the edge of the beach at the treeline and brush, and settle into the spot, then feeling it grow into a place, then slowly, slowly (be)coming into a field, a common field with the ocean, the others. I begin to yawn, stretch, breathe, to receive. Underneath my consciousness I am orienting, even naming what I see, or pre-naming, noting, noticing, and coming into *something* (a state of being) out of and through the oral and sensing. The proposition of "temple" is with me, somewhere, is that underneath me, within, shared? I fold my limbs, I soften, I smell the fecund air. I am lightly sweating, damp, always so moist. The ground is soft, and some of the rocks are tricky. I turn to face the ocean and see the horizon, or rather, receive it, its vastness, the velvety lapping waves makes a soundscape / sensescape, pervading. Something is opening, moving within and through me. I feel a sense of the vastness of the space, how the trees rustle and root, how large stones by the ocean form and reform, decay, to create the stone beach and brush over vast epochs. I am sensing all of us together, yet in

our own grooves. I am with the night before, with the conversation about water, with my own crystallizing, breathing, b r e a t h i n g. Somehow through this and the moving, and the receiving, a temple with the ocean and this place, some way is forming, coming into experiential, feeling figuration.

Facing the horizon, I turn to my right and see them. I have been feeling us altogether, but seeing them here, us all in this experience together, I am caught by the beauty of the moment and indeed, feeling it move through me and with me.

I want to take it in and receive it through the screen, hold on to time, extend it, to make a frame for composing, or is that a window?, a living image, animated through future memory and evocation.

I go to my phone, itself a creature in constant portent of clogging from the moist, and I pick it up to take the picture.

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EPILOGUE

In my movement research at this time, I am attempting to begin to articulate the potency of "living measurement" as it relates to sensing, right relation, and access to one's creative source. What Prapto on that day called "safety receiving measurement" is surely related to this term and the unfolding of a process of coming-into-language. I am curious about the *pleasure* of *measure*, how a capacity to sense and receive one's surroundings is inextricably linked to pleasure, life-giving eros, and a keystone into a practice of interrelatedness and right relation. How does moving as a sensing-being and sensuary being support the enjoyment of breathing and being in living communication, in the felt experience and vividness of being in a body on and with earth, "getting dirty," as Melissa K. Nelson says, and how does this way of practicing orient a person to have empathy, intimacy, and mutual care with the surroundings, the humans and more-than-humans in place?[7] I am wondering, as I write this, and as I recall the movement at Phihoaan Beach, with Claire, and with so many Amerta colleagues and dance friends, how having one's own sense of safety in *receiving* (rather than something that is boundaried and fixed, as in safety in one's own turret) supports this. How the moisture supports this. How the faceted aspects of Amerta support this.

Over the past few years, I have also been in deep reflection with this experience of pleasure, measure, in relation to the source of creation, or *Amerta,* nectar, how being connected to one's own spring, or creative source, supports a capacity to be in one's own position, with a sense of openness and space with the place, and from that state, to feel the dimensional life-force / life-breath that animates. I call this pulsing, how the pulsations of life bring pleasure, jouissance, puissance, and the breathing of life, itself.

Connection to one's source and sensing-receiving-place in my experience are a key for being in relation, for developing kinship. Amerta is a source for inspiration, and offers much for reflection in the shared image pool.

[7] Nelson, Melissa K. "Getting Dirty: The Eco-Eroticism of Women in Indigenous Oral Literatures," *Sovereign Erotics,* Barker, Joanne, Ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017). 229-260.